

UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR EMERITUS

Fayerweather Hall

25 April 1987

Dear Mike,

That was a grand occasion, one that Pat Moynihan clearly enjoyed as well as appreciated. It was elevated, no less in your introduction than in his well-grounded, forthright, and statesmanlike address. I'll not soon forget his reminder that we can easily slip into institutional complacency just as I'll remember -- and perhaps appropriate (with due acknowledgment) your rara avis in the Senate aviary. Would that many more of those who had said they would come had had the wit to do so.

The conferring of the amply merited degree upon Pat was of course much in mind as Harriet and I walked home, elevated in spirit and weary in body. (We had left the annual meeting of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia this morning to get to the ceremony in Low.) Upon getting home, we found waiting for us a preprint of an extraordinary biographical piece by Josh Lederberg, giving a "discovery account" of his epoch-making discovery of genetic recombination in bacteria that won him The Prize. You would find it extraordinarily interesting, not least the pages devoted to the crucial Columbia years, telling how his young mentor in biology, Francis J. Ryan, in effect created Josh's life in science. Altogether moving, though never sentimentalized; a tribute to Columbia and the consequential members of its faculty.

But to get to the emerging point of this rapidly lengthening letter; on page 13 of Josh's paper one reads: "Nevertheless, among my most cherished honorifics are the M.D. degrees (honoris causa) that I have received from Tufts and from the University of Turin." And that struck a chord. Columbia has long since awarded Josh the honorary Sc.D. and the Hamilton award (as I discovered when first proposing him for an honorary degree). But he never did receive his Columbia M.D. which he would have had 1948, had he been able to resume his medical studies at P&S in September 1946 (as I learn from page 12 of the ms.). But, most improbably, he was offered a post at Wisconsin that would allow this 21-year-old to continue his (pathmaking) researches in microbial genetics that, in the event, won him the Nobel. And so, I would say to the greater benefit of us all, he went on with that scientific work rather than returning to complete his medical degree.

The 40th anniversary of Josh's great discovery has been commemorated near and far. Would it not be a symbolically beautiful moment for Columbia to award him an M.D. (honoris causa) in 1988 in place of the M.D. he never did receive from P&S precisely 40 years before? The quoted lines from his autobiographic text



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make it clear that this honor would mean much to Josh, perhaps more than any other of the many honors awarded him over the years, with the possible --but only the possible and far from certain -- exception of the Nobel. (There is documentary evidence that the young Joshua had considered declining the Prize but, in the event, refrained since it would have had him seeming to upstage his greatly senior fellow recipients, Ed Tatum and George Beadle.)

Having Josh declared an honorary member of the P&S Class of '88 just as his classmates in the Class of '48 return for their 40th reunion would lend an admirable symbolic character to the entire event. It should mean much also to us of the engendering institution and would be something of a notable occasion, I believe, for the knowing national as well as local community of scientists, scholars, and physicians.

I'm sorry for the exceeding length of this suggestion but it did seem necessary to provide context for it.

Yours,



Robert K. Merton

President Michael I. Sovern
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